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SUBJECT: THAI BINH COMMUNES: ONCE DYSFUNCTIONAL, NOW EXEMPLARS OF
"GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY"

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On a recent visit to several villages in Thai Binh Province, Poloff found local officials striving to implement the "Grassroots Democracy Ordinance," which enshrines greater transparency in budgets and allows more villager participation in local decision-making. According to the GDO, Party officials must organize "confidence votes" for People's Committee and People's Council Chairman and Vice Chairman once every two years, with local Fatherland Front representatives presiding; no leader in the villages Poloff went to was voted out of office in 2008 elections. Aware previous governance problems in their areas played a significant role in prompting national grassroots democracy efforts, district and commune officials were confident these problems are a thing of the past. End Summary.

"Grassroots Democracy" in the Vietnamese Context -----

¶2. (SBU) Communist Party and Government of Vietnam leaders who obsess over stability began "grassroots democracy" efforts after riots in Thai Binh Province erupted in 1997 over land grabs and official corruption. When used by the Party and Government, however, "grassroots democracy" does not refer to the ability of people to freely choose their representatives and leaders, but to leaders' accountability to the people.

¶3. (SBU) In early 2007, the National Assembly Standing Committee passed the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance (GDO), which upgraded and replaced a 2003 decree. The GDO states that commune governments must publicize socio-economic development, land use and regulatory plans and estimates, the accounts of annual commune budgets and the management and use of funds, investment amounts and development aid for programs and projects. District and commune governments must also publicize total fees and other finances collected as well as the results of investigations, inspections and the settlement of "negative incidents" such as corruption cases at the commune and village levels.

¶4. (SBU) The GDO also delineates the responsibilities and powers officials and civil servants have in settling local problems. The GDO prohibits acts that "victimize people who have complaints," but does not specify penalties for local officials who abuse power. The GDO allows villagers to propose candidates for local leadership positions and "no confidence" votes in their leaders, although local Party bodies such as the Fatherland Front (the Party's umbrella organization for social organizations) preside over these votes.

Practicing "Grassroots Democracy" in Thai Binh -----

¶5. (SBU) On an October 30 visit to the Thai Binh villages in which the violent demonstrations of 1997 had taken place, Poloff found government and Party officials striving to implement the GDO. Thai Thuy District Party leaders told Poloff that, after the GVN promulgated the GDO, they organized workshops for all commune leaders on the ordinance's contents and instructed commune leaders to disseminate information on the rights people enjoy under the GDO. The District People's Committee Vice Chairman asserted that, due to ongoing dialogue between local officials and "the people," improved

living and health standards and solid rice and other agricultural production, the situation across the District was "stable."

¶6. (SBU) In Thai Binh's Quynh Phuc and An Ninh Communes, Party officials in 2008 organized no-confidence votes for the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the People's Committee and People's Council (akin to a local National Assembly). However, no leader was voted out of office. Officials in the communes said they publicized local budget inlays and outlays, as required by the GDO, through village loudspeaker systems and via bulletin boards in local Party offices. Before beginning a project -- for example, building a road -- local officials consulted the affected people first. Invariably, some villagers did not want a project to proceed, but Party officials were eventually able to win them over through consultation, coaxing and non-financial compensation.

¶7. (SBU) The Quynh Coi Party Chairman admitted that his commune had experienced problems with land grabs in 1997. However, since commune leaders have more "regular dialogues" with villagers, as directed under the GDO, the number of complaints have steadily dropped, he declared. He said his office organized confidence votes once every two years not only for the People's Committee and People's Council Chairman and Vice Chairman but for school principals and mass organization heads as well.

¶8. (SBU) "The people know everything" about how much money the commune gets from the central government budget and how this money is spent, the An Ninh People's Committee Chairman asserted. Before a project is begun, the People's Council meets to discuss ideas and people are invited to air their views, he added. The commune has not had any negative incidents -- demonstrations -- since the late 1990's because villagers are involved in the decision-making process

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per their rights under the GDO, he concluded.

Comment: Showcasing Changes in Governance

¶9. (SBU) In 1997, the central government called in hundreds of security personnel to restore order in and around An Ninh and Quynh Coi Communes and closed off the area to outsiders for months after the demonstrations. That Poloff was easily able to visit these areas shows just how much the situation has improved and how confident local leaders are in how they are governing. Based on how these Thai Binh communes are implementing the GDO, the ordinance seems a small but important step towards more participatory government in Vietnam. End Comment.

¶10. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.

MICHALAK